

Chester, PA – Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) delivered the commencement address at Widener University, congratulating the school's graduating class and imparting the values that have guided him from his career in the Navy through his time as a representative. More than 6,000 people attended the ceremony on Widener's Quadrangle where 674 students received their degrees and the Congressman was presented with a Doctorate of Public Service by David Oskin Chair of the Board of Trustees. The Congressman emphasized honor, perseverance and loyalty as qualities to which the Class of '09 should aspire for themselves and to pass on to subsequent generations.

"As someone who wore the cloth of this nation for 31 years in the Navy, I have a deep appreciation for those who understand what it means to serve their country with honor," said Congressman Sestak. "I encourage today's graduates to use the skills and knowledge they have gained at this wonderful institution to give back to their communities and nation."

As an example of someone who epitomized this attitude, the Congressman, who commanded the U.S.S. Samuel B. Roberts, shared the story of the first ship to bear that name, which was sunk during the Battle of Latay Gulf in World War II. On that vessel was Gunner Carr, the young man who manned the gun mount, and who was severely injured in the ferocious battle. As the Executive Officer went around the ship looking for survivors, he found Gunner Carr with his leg mangled, trying to climb up to his post with his one good leg in an attempt to fire a shell from a gun mount that was destroyed. The Executive Officer left to get a stretcher and some help, and when he returned he found Gunner again trying to fire a shell from the broken gun mount. The Executive Officer successfully removed Gunner from the ship and placed him in a life raft, where he then died. In his battle memoirs, the Captain wrote of Gunner Carr: "There is 'no higher honor' than to serve with men such as this."

Speaking to the quality of perseverance, the Congressman recalled a story from President Clinton's White House, in which he served, when a group of historians and men who fought the battle at Normandy visited the President before he spoke at the Normandy cemetery for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. During his opportunity to speak, one historian made particularly moving remarks about the young men who fought in that brutal battle. Members of the German Army, believing a military could not function without its leaders, targeted the American officers. Even without their commanders and despite severe casualties, the remaining troops rose from the beaches of Normandy and seized the bluffs. The historian spoke of a special "it," a unique characteristic that Americans have instilled in their youth for generations that allows them to accomplish extraordinary results, such as what those soldiers did on June 6, 1944.

“And then he turned to the President and said, ‘Whatever that “it” is, that “it” is what makes America great,’” said Congressman Sestak. “I have never forgotten that story or that description of the exceptional quality that American families and communities such as Widener University produce in our youth. It is the responsibility of each successive generation of Americans to persevere through difficult times and maintain the passion for service that has made our country great.”

To illustrate the value of loyalty to each other the Congressman used a midrash (a rabbinic commentary on the Old Testament). In the story, a businessman visiting a foreign country is found guilty of spying and sentenced to execution. He is allowed to return to his home for 30 days by having a friend take his place in prison with the stipulation that the friend will be hanged if the man does not come back within the 30 day period. When a storm delays the man’s return, it appears the friend will be hung; however, the man arrives moments before the hanging. He insists that he is to be punished, not his friend, while the friend argues that it is too late, and to still hang him. The king, hearing the argument, asked to see them and, after listening to them both, allows them to go free under the condition that he can be the “third friend.”

“There is nothing like a friend in life,” said Congressman Sestak. “I have been fortunate to have friends such as this during my career and I have discovered just how much more a group can accomplish when they feel a strong bond with one another. I hope that kind of commitment will guide this year’s class as they strive to reach their goals and continue the great American aspiration of leaving even greater opportunities for the next generation.”

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.*

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